

REVIEW: TAMMIE RUBIN'S "I AM AT MY BEST WHEN I'M ESCAPING"

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Installation view of the Tito's Prize 2022 Exhibition: "I am at my best when I'm escaping" (2023) by Tammie Rubin at Big Medium. Photo: Héctor Martínez.

In *I am at my best when I'm escaping*, on view at Big Medium in Austin, artist Tammie Rubin offers a roadmap of personal, lineal, and physical journeys across time and place in America. The solo exhibition is part of Rubin's receipt of the 2022 Tito's Prize, awarded annually to an Austin-based artist through the local arts organization Big Medium and its sponsorship partner, Tito's Handmade Vodka. Rubin, who teaches ceramics and sculpture at St. Edwards University, relocated to Austin in 2015 and has become a fixture in the city's art community while continuing to gain national attention with her work.

Though the show at Big Medium is not technically an immersive exhibition, it takes on an immersive quality: ceramic sculptures, wall-sized murals, and installations made of everyday objects tell a story of identity and memory through multivalent prompts that equally explore the mundane and profane — what Rubin has referred to as a "push-pull" in her work. Quilt symbols once used as code in the Underground Railroad are emblazoned on each wall, while unnerving conical forms reminiscent of the Ku Klux Klan keep watch over the gallery. A blue map of the U.S. highway system appears as a living, breathing organism in one corner, vascular in both shape and color, as white and red stake flags jut out from the mural and populate the gallery's perimeter, enveloping the space like a disassembled American flag.



Installation view of "Portals" (2023) by Tammie Rubin at Big Medium. Photo: Barbara Purcell.

Blue is the show's central color and brings to mind Chefchaouen, Morocco's famed "blue city" in the country's northwest region. Some say Chefchaouen's white-washed buildings were painted blue by the Muslims and Jews who fled Spain during the Inquisition; a way to connect to water and sky and the divine. Standing in the gallery, surrounded by similar hues, it seems Rubin has intended to transport the viewer to another realm as well, starting with a church scene rendered just enough to guide us into a place of Southern roots and family lore.

An ancestral altar made of blue wood fragments rests on the floor in the gallery's front window, as two church pews (coated in blue) add spatial and temporal depth. The pews are staggered and feature ceramic, organic forms — ball moss, biomorphic shapes — dipped, fired, and/or glazed; the one set farther back, *Sunday Morning Offerings No. 2* (2023), contains two sacks of Bertie County Peanuts; it's a tender push-pull, this side-by-side positioning of the familiar and peculiar, like nostalgia for a place that will always hold pain.

Beyond both pews, the mural *North Star* (2023) reveals a constellation of masonite prayer fans with vintage photos of the artist's relatives. Collaged onto masonite cutouts, the sepia photos blend into the wood-like material, causing the images to both retreat into themselves and stand out from the blue geometric pattern on the wall — a pattern that recalls quilt symbols once used to help individuals escape from slavery in the South. This overlay of history, set a century apart, continues across the way with Rubin's plotted pen and ink drawings, which lift figures from old photographs (including a 1950s yearbook) and turn them into line art, their presence emerging from the negative space.

Image-dissolving abstractions certainly demonstrate the push-pull in Rubin's works, but her ceramic sculptures remain the most striking example of their laden open interpretation. In an ongoing series prominently featured in the exhibition, Rubin uses a variety of objects — funnels, traffic cones — to create conical pieces from slip cast porcelain. Comical, elegant, disquieting — these forms have been compared to West African headdresses and Dickensian dunce caps, but they instantly conjure the KKK; the smaller the sculptures (most sit comfortably on a shelf), the more disturbing they appear. Some are adorned with trinkets, others map textures and patterns, a few even have mouths. Smiles, in fact. Yet they all have holes for eyes, and those eyes stare out from a bottomless void. The ceramics series title, *Always & Forever (forever, ever)*, is a mirror reflection of their push-pull allure: part '70s R&B song, part Ms. Jackson apology, part American prophecy.



Installation view of "Portals" (2023) by Tammie Rubin at Big Medium. Photo: Barbara Purcell.

I am at my best when I'm escaping invokes the Underground Railroad and the Great Migration, the open highway, even the forever-ness of a void. But the show's title is in fact taken from a line in the recent HBO show *Station Eleven*, based on a 2014 novel of the same name by Emily St. John Mandel, about a global pandemic that all but wipes out humanity. In the recently adapted series, one of the main characters — an artist — spectacularly sets fire to her studio while voicing: "I don't want to live the wrong life and then die. I am at my best when I'm escaping."

Rubin's Big Medium show burns like a bright blue flame.

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